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ABSTRACT

Factors that affect college students' choice of studies and implications for colleges and universities that are competing for the declining numbers of students were assessed. A student-selection process model, derived from the innovation-decision model, provides some insights into the choice process and indicates the likely limitations of the promotional effort of colleges. The model also indicates that benefit segmentation may be a useful way of analyzing student demand. To test the feasibility of using benefit segmentation, attitudinal data relating to choice of studies at Huddersfield Polytechnic were used. Students rated the importance of the following criteria to selection of studies: career prospects, prestige value, ease of entry, interest, advice of parent or teacher, desire to leave home environment, to give more time to decide upon future career, intellectual level of the field, financial gain upon completion of studies, location of college, social acceptability on completion of studies, and familiarity with subject area. Four distinct benefit segments were identified: familiar interest-oriented, escapist, career-oriented, and security-oriented. Using the student-selection process model and the student-benefit segments, proposals were made concerning how courses and colleges should direct their publicity efforts. It is suggested that departments across colleges should cooperate to generate demand for their subjects and that colleges need to concentrate on image building. The way that the student-selection process allows colleges to use deception to make short-term gains in student demand is described. It is claimed that such practices are likely to prove damaging in the long term. (SW)

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THE STUDENT-SELECTION PROCESS: A MODEL OF STUDENT COURSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

The choice of higher education course to be studied must rank as one of the most consequential decisions that an individual has to make. Equally, academic careers within higher education are moulded on the basis of attracting the right quality and quantity of students. The impending decline in student numbers, based upon depressed birth rates since the mid-Nineteen Sixties, suggest that an ability to understand the variables governing potential student choice of course and institution could become critical in the future. Educational institutions will have to learn to understand their sources of students, just as businesses have to understand their markets. Equally, educational planners at national level will increasingly need to have such an understanding in order that resources can be more effectively channelled.

Although the choice made is likely to be critical to an individual student's future, it is often made using limited information and poor advice. This is perhaps heightened nowadays with the increas- insistence made by many employers that first degrees or diplomas should have relevance to them, and to the individual's intended career. Consequently, poor vocational advice, prior to course entry, is having increasingly serious implications for the individual.

It can be conjectured that many students pursue courses that do not fit their personality or ability, and that they are directed towards such unsuitable courses through imperfect advice and knowledge. For the individual and the nation this is wasteful in time, energy and resources.

This paper investigates student decision criteria from the viewpoint of a growing higher educational establishment attempting to attract students.

A model of the student-selection process is derived from the popular model of the innovation-decision process.[1] Dominant features of the "persuasion" element of the process indicates that student-

selection could be elucidated by "benefit segmentation."[2] This is attempted using cluster analysis to identify homogeneous groups of students on the basis of psychographic dimensions. The segments identified are found to have distinct characteristics, and the implications of these findings are now discussed.

THE STUDENT SELECTION PROCESS

The literature of decision making processes is profuse. It extends from the academic approach of philosophers to the practical study of buying motives by marketers. Rather than attempt to develop a unique model of the student-selection process it was thought more appropriate to fit the particular decision making situation to an academically acceptable general model.

An appropriate model was found within the literature of innovation. The paradigm of the innovation-decision process, developed by Rogers and Shoemaker,[3] is similar to the student-selection process in that it attempts to explain a risk laden decision being made by an individual. In fact, as defined by Rogers and Shoemaker,[4] the decision being made by a student when choosing a course in higher education is an innovation decision.

In the innovation-decision process (Figure 1) the antecedents filter and colour the awareness and knowledge that a decision maker has about an idea. The acquired knowledge and perceived characteristics of the idea act during the persuasion phase to produce a decision, to reject it or adopt it. Details of antecedents and perceived characteristics of innovations are given in Figure II. The confirmation stage refers to post adoption behaviour, such as continued use or rejection. The social forces on a student, once he has commenced a course in higher education, make this stage less critical than in normal innovation decisions.

An adaptation of the innovation-decision process to fit the student-selection process is presented in Figures III and IV. Prospective students have a wide range of career opportunities open to them. Many of these opportunities do not involve taking a course in higher education. Personal and environmental criteria sensitize them to only a few of the opportunities available. Promotional activity by institutions, including mass media advertisements, are means whereby messages about career opportunities may be communicated. However, innovation research suggests that "direct injection" by institutions has little power to change attitudes or behaviour.[5] Far more

important is personal contact with local opinion leaders. An individual who is initially predisposed towards towards a limited career choice based upon incomplete knowledge, perhaps brought about because of a parochial background, will, because of ignorance, wish to investigate alternatives in greater depth. As a result, a career opportunity or course with a poor superficial image within a social system is likely to be rejected out of hand irrespective of the inaccuracy of that impression. An indicication of the importance of superficial features is the impact that the change of name for a course can have. At one university, after a change of course name, that course attracted 200% more applicants than in the previous year. Another similar course within the same university, with course name unchanged, had a growth in numbers of applicants of only 15% over the same period - a figure close to the national average for such degrees.

Innovation research suggests that the perceived desirability of an innovation is dependent upon the perceived score of the innovation on five characteristics. These easily fit the proposed student-selection model.

"Perceived relative advantage" or "benefit" to be gained from a course seems a likely key variable.

"Perceived compatability" of a course with the individual's ideals and current beliefs is likely to be important.

"Perceived complexity" refers to the perceived need for new knowledge and activities to be associated with an innovation. A career opportunity which is outside the normal "career aid" given by a school could be seen to have complexity and therefore be less likely to be adopted.

"Trialability" relates to the possibility of trying an alternative before commitment. This is not easy with careers, but it is likely that many students will feel that they have "tried" education or particularly some subjects that are taught at degree level. They think they know what higher education is "about" - however wrong they may be.

"Observability" refers to the visibility of an opportunity. The more conspicuous an opportunity, the greater is the likelihood that it will be selected.

It seems likely that there are two stages within the persuasion phase: the first concerning the general career opportunity, and the second - institutions offering that opportunity. Such a decision reduction process is necessitated by the large number of course/institution choices available.

The second stage is likely to be a very subjective decision in many cases, with preferences being based upon general impressions of institutions and their locations. Institutions vary considerably in their strength from department to department, so general good impressions are unlikely to be a good guide to the quality of particular courses. Again, an institution and its town's general image is important, because this is a likely factor that potential students will screen out at an early stage.

The final selection made is likely to involve the resolution of a number of conflicts. The individual will attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance - the gap between expectations and experience.[6] There will be an attempt to balance the attractiveness of an alternative against the perceived likelihood of rejection if an approach is made.[7] Fishbein suggests that individual actions are strongly coloured by perception of group norms and their motivation to comply with them.[8] The final selection, like the initial knowledge stage, is very sensitive to environmental pressures.

Personal contact with credible sources is the primary communications channel for knowledge about alternatives and is the principal means by which attitudes are changed. The final, selection from the reduced set of alternatives filtered by the social system, is evaluated in terms of confirmity to group norms as well as perceived benefit. The selection process is so deeply entrenched within the individual's psyche and the social system that is is unlikely that any institution is capable of having a significant impact upon choice without a thorough understanding of the processes involved.

BENEFIT SEGMENTATION

Although institutions will not find it easy to intervene in the student selection process, the model suggests two ways in which they might do this.

The first is during the awareness and knowledge stage: unless a sufficiently high level is achieved, the opportunity that an institution is making available will not be accessed, because it is not known. Furthermore, the importance of personal relationships within the decision making process suggests that public relations activities are likely to be more successful than the traditional course brochure and display advertising methods.

Once awareness is achieved, the institution can attempt to generate a differential advantage in order that it can become one of the preferred alternatives. The student selection model suggests that this can be achieved by appealing to characteristics deemed critical at the persuasion stage. In the model, these characteristics are too numerous and general to effectively guide strategy, since they vary so much between individuals. Here, marketing benefit segmentation is suggested, because it identifies groups of individuals seeking similar utilities from a product or service. There are two reasons why benefit segmentation has become popular in product marketing. Firstly, it breaks demand down into sections with a common interest relative to the product (the key variable in marketing). Other means of segmentation such as: social class, region, ethnic group, etc. allow demand to be broken down, but do not focus upon the needs of the individuals concerned. Secondly, is the guide it gives to selling a product. By identifying the needs of specific groups within the market, it allows the product to be formulated for them, and messages can be developed that appeal to those needs.

The success of this approach in product marketing[9] makes it an appealing method of analysing the student selection process.

METHODOLOGY

To test the feasibility of using "benefit segmentation" an existing data base was used[10]. This contained attitudinal data relating to choice of course in higher education taken from students at Huddersfield Polytechnic.

The criteria in the quantitative part of the study were arrived at using a series of non-structured interviews with students, and these were identified as follows:-

1. Career prospects offered by course.
2. Prestige value of course.
3. Ease of entry to course.
4. Interesting/stimulating course.
5. Advice/recommendations of parent/teacher.
6. Desire to leave home environment.
7. To give more time to decide upon future career.
8. Intellectual level of course of study.
9. Financial gain upon completion of course.
10. Location of college.
11. Social acceptability on completion of course.
12. Familiarity with subject area of course.

A quota sample of students was then asked to complete a questionnaire which involved scoring the importance of each criterion on a nine point scale within the extremes of "unimportant" and "important." Students were then asked a series of questions of a classificatory nature.

An attempt was made to identify the benefit segments using cluster analysis. Ward's hierarchical clustering algorithm[11] was used because of the availability of programmes and familiarity with the technique. To choose between the wide range of clusting methods is not easy, particularly since evidence suggests that results can vary significantly with the algorithm used.[12] In the event, Ward's method identified meaningful and useful clusters.

STUDENT-BASED SEGMENTS

Figure V gives a breakdown of the useable sample taken. This can be compared with the breakdown by course, of four student-benefit segments identified after hierarchical clustering (Figure VI). The choice of four clusters rather than other combinations is purely trial and error. The three cluster solutions forces two dissimilar clusters to combine. Solutions with higher numbers of clusters do not reveal segments particularly different from those shown. The student-benefit clusters contain noticeably different proportions of students from the courses involved. Inspection of the scores on characteristics summarized in Figure VII show them to vary from cluster to cluster. This suggests that the students within clusters one to four could be stereotyped respectively as:- "familiar interest oriented," "escapist," "career orientated" or "security orientated."

Cluster 1 (Familiar interest orientated)

This contains students who were seeking a course which they would find interesting and stimulating. This was sought by looking for a course in a "familiar subject;" probably one they had already found interesting, or become enthused with, prior to entering higher education.

Such students show little concern for any long term consequences of the choice of subject in terms of career opportunity, although they have a higher than average concern for its social acceptability. The relatively high score of "location of college" is probably indicative of the wide range of establishments offering the type of course in which they are interested.

Not surprisingly, this cluster is dominated by Arts and Humanities students, as courses in this area are widely available and are likely to provide an outlet for enthusiasm generated during sixth form study. Music, which is relatively highly represented in this cluster, provides a similar outlet. The high proportion of Hotel and Catering students in this cluster probably reflects an opportunity that has been found for the student to pursue and enthusiasm found outside school.

In terms of persuasion variables in the student selection process, strong relationships are discernible. The "relative advantage" is the opportunity to take an interesting course. This was "compatible" with their existing habits in that it allowed them to continue their sixth form studies. Simultaneously, they reduced the danger of "complexity" by pursuing studies that were familiar. The subjects chosen for higher education were "observable" in that they were conspicuous with school culture, and "trialable" in that student had already had an opportunity to study these.

In summary, we can say that Cluster 1 members are driven by a desire to study a subject with which they are familiar and which they have found interesting. They seek short-term gains from higher education, having little concern for the long-term implications.

Cluster 2 (Escapists)

The reasons for students in this cluster entering higher education are predominantly negative. The strong features shown are a desire to "delay making a career choice" and to "get away from home." Unlike the students in cluster 1, who are interest driven and whose learning motivations should prove stronger, the motives of this cluster suggests that they would expect more intrinsic interest and tutor direction from a course of study. Similar to cluster 1 students, this group exhibits little concern for the long-term gains to be obtained from higher education.

Cluster 2 contains a high proportion of Art and Humanities and Business Studies students. Since the students profess no great interest in their choice of course, their choice was perhaps driven by indifference: the Arts and Humanities students perhaps taking a course that followed on from their sixth form studies; the Business Studies students opting for something that is at least "a change" from what they had found uninteresting before.

In relation to persuasion characteristics, the "relative advantages" refer to the opportunity to be away from home rather than to defer seeking employment. These are "benefits" offered by higher education generally rather than any particular course. In terms of the avoidance

of complexity, a preference for the more qualitative rather than quantitative subjects is significant.

This "escapist" cluster are using higher education to avoid making a decision about a career and to get away from home. They are more concerned about the short-term benefits of going to college than in long-term career or educational gains.

Cluster 3 (Career orientated)

The benefits this group hope to gain from higher education are of a long-term nature relating to their career. They see this as being associated with studying courses of value and interest to them, suggesting that they see a career as something to enjoy rather than merely a vocation. Their high rating in desire to leave home suggests independence. A distinct feature of this cluster is a relatively high concern for a wide number of issues in the selection process. There is the impression of the choice of course, although interest driven, being a highly rational and future orientated decision, with long-term issues such as career in mind.

Not surprisingly, the larger proportion of students seeking the benefits just outlined had opted for more vocational courses, such as education, business studies or catering. It is interesting to note the appearance of a large number of science students in this cluster. The traditional science based 'A' level subjects may appear to be vocationally orientated to many students, but in fact provide few direct career opportunities outside teaching, or perhaps research for the more successful. It can be postulated that economics is a similar apparently vocationally orientated subject that provides few directly relevant career opportunities, and such graduates are more likely to find their career in something like accountancy.

Members of this cluster are seeking a relative advantage of career help from courses chosen. They see higher education as a means rather than an end in itself and it follows that they are likely to be concerned more with their final career, rather than details of the course being considered.

Cluster 4 (Security Orientated)

Unlike Cluster 3, higher education here is a means to an end; so much so that interest and stimulation from the course are not deemed important. It is as though higher education is a necessary evil; a penenance essential to achieve long-term benefits.

Membership of this cluster is dominated by engineering students. The superficial association of engineering with career prospects is obvious, but it is likely that there are more subtle forces at play during the persuasion stage of the student-selection process. Rightly, engineering students have identified their subject as the vocational branch of science. Their pragmatism dictates that they choose a course in terms of career benefits rather than the wider benefits that higher education can give. It is arguable that they have not found science intrinsically interesting, so are compelled to look for long term benefits from higher education. Their choice of engineering may be a function of their disposition towards the concrete and tangible: products are the most observable output of industry and the link between products and engineering is self evident. Engineering therefore becomes the natural choice of career, rather than other less conspicuous careers with less tangible associations. The clear link between familiar products and engineering is probably the reason why many students perceive engineering to be a familiar subject. The logic may be secure, but fact dictates that engineering is unlikely to produce the career prospects, financial gain or prestige that the students say they desire. Relative to other industrial careers, prospects are poor for engineers in that they are less well paid and tend to have lower status within organisations and society.

The members of cluster 4 are seeking long term career advantages from higher education. They seek future security in their career and do this in the short term by studying what they see as being a familiar subject.

DISCUSSION

Cluster analysis shows that distinct student-benefit segments do exist which can be grouped on the basis of the benefits that students are seeking from higher education. Furthermore, only a few of the possible reasons for taking a particular course in higher education were found to be primary motivators. These can be separated into long-term career benefits and short-term higher education benefits. The higher education benefits can be divided thus: the escape opportunity and opportunity to indulge an interest. Each benefit segment has a distinct character in terms of the courses being followed and the benefits students are seeking.

Whilst many academics and administrators will view the "breakfast cereal" approach to course publicity with abhorrence, one must have due regard to the realities of the situation and recognise that the bulk of "factual" promotional expenditure is wasted. By manipulating promotional effort in recognition of the benefits being sought by students, one might be able to attract more appropriately motivated and qualified candidates. For example, the findings suggest that arts and humanities courses may be able to attract more students by emphasising the opportunity that the course provides to indulge their interests. If it is desired to attract the "escapist" students then emphasis on that aspect of higher education might be successful. By contrast, the research suggests that engineering courses need to concentrate upon the career and vocational opportunities they offer. The type of approach just discussed, may result in more successful selling of a course, but would not conform to a professional marketers view of how it should be marketed.

A true application of the marketing concept would involve changing the product to fulfil the needs of the target segment as closely as is economically possible. Promotion of the product would then concentrate upon making the target market aware that the product can give them the principal benefits they are seeking. The importance of personal communications in the innovation-decision process (and assumed in the student-selection decision) show the necessity for products and courses to fulfil the benefits that consumers or students seek in them. If a

course does not fulfil the benefits that were expected of it, cognitive dissonance will occur, and eventually this failure will be communicated to prospective students by informal communications. Such a long-term feedback loop may be one reason for the relatively poor demand for engineering places at colleges. The poor short-term feedback, and the inability of prospective students to evaluate courses before commiting themselves, provides an opportunity for deception. Examples of dubious practices by higher education establishments in taking advantage of such situations can be cited

> In an attempt to tap the growing demand for business studies courses, one University has taken the first two years of its established economics degree, and only teaches business subjects in the final year. The course is offered as "Business Studies" and now attracts a large number of students.
>
> In an attempt to take advantage of the same growth in demand, many institutions have added a "sugar coating" of "management" to ailing technology courses, and now promote them as "business" or "management" with technology.

Such practices would not be allowed by the Council for National Academic Awards, but are possible in the less accountable University sector and in non-CNAA validated courses.

Student-selection behaviour may allow neglect of real student needs in the short-term, but in the long-term, deception or lack of concern for the benefits being sought is likely to be disastrous. Many academic so called "high fliers" have do doubt established dynamic reputations by exploiting such practices, and have then used this reputation to further their careers in a different institution - perhaps to exploit similar situations on a higher plane? One can only feel compassion for the long established academics and administrators who are left to cope with the long-term chaos.

Most promotional material issuing from educational establishments attempts to "sell" particular courses. The best that can be achieved by this method is to increase a particular course's share of the population, who have already chosen it for study. For example,

individual production engineering courses stand to gain little from battling for the few students who wish to study the subject; more benefit would be derived from institutions co-operating and trying to increase total demand for such courses. The likelihood that most students first choose a subject and then an institution means that institutions should attempt to cultivate an image that projects a relative advantage over competitors. Most college brochures are little more than lists of courses with a few photographs for good measure. Maybe individual institutions should concentrate upon the issues that students may see as benefits over other institutions, such as accommodation, sporting facilities, student services, teaching methods, geographical location, etc.

To "win" in this increasingly competitive market, institutions will have to become more concerned with "image building," and realise that this is more than a corporate logo and headed notepaper. To succeed in the future, they will need to think more clearly about what their promotional effort hopes to achieve, and formulate a strategy designed to reach this goal.

The research undertaken has thus provided some support for the key concepts developed. Without considerably more work, the proposed model of the student-selection process cannot be accepted or rejected. Used as an analytical tool, it has helped formulate questions concerning the choice process of students and the likely effect of the promotional effort of institutions. The limited attempt to apply benefit segmentation has been fruitful in that significant benefit segments were located. The segments had characteristics that showed the benefits being sought by students and indicated the appropriate message for promotional effort. To justify the ideas proposed further research is needed.

A research project is now in hand to investigate the course selection process of sixth formers. In this, a large sample of sixth formers will be interviewed in an attempt to derive information to test the student-selection model and to further investigate benefit-segments. Interviewing sixth formers will allow the concept to be tested for generality across a wider number of courses and institutions. If

successful, the project may be able to supply some of the basic information that institutions will need to formulate plans to help them face the impending decline in demand for places in higher education.

SUMMARY

Choice of course in higher education is a most critical decision. It is also a choice process that institutions offering higher education will have to understand if they are to compete successfully for their share of the impending decline in demand for places. Already, one institution, aware of such a decline, has appointed a marketing officer with a business background.

A student-selection process model, derived from the innovation-decision model, gives some insights into the choice process and it shows the likely limitations of the promotional effort of colleges. It also indicated that benefit segmentation may be a useful way of analysing student demand. Using the approach, four distinct benefit segments were identified as "familiar interest orientated," "escapist," "career orientated," and "security orientated."

Using the student-selection process model and the student-benefit segments, proposals were made concerning how courses and colleges should direct their publicity efforts. It was suggested that departments across colleges should co-operate in attempting to generate demand for their subjects and that colleges need to concentrate on image building to give them relative advantage over other institutions offering similar courses.

Although there is insufficient evidence to prove the reliability or otherwise of the student-selection model or the use of benefit segmentation, they did provide insight into the choice process.

It was shown how the nature of the student-selection process allows colleges to use deception to make short-term gains in student demand; by making cosmetic changes to ailing courses and by re-naming them it has proved possible to tap demand from more fashionable areas. Although giving immediate gains, such practices are likely to prove damaging in the long-term.

For generations, higher education has been a growth area where tenured academics have continued teaching what most interests

them, rather than what is likely to be of most value to their students or the nation. The approaching era of competition may force the shedding of this complacency, and institutions will have to look more to the needs of the students that provide their sustenance.

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FIGURE I

PARADIGM OF INNOVATION-DECISION PROCESS 1

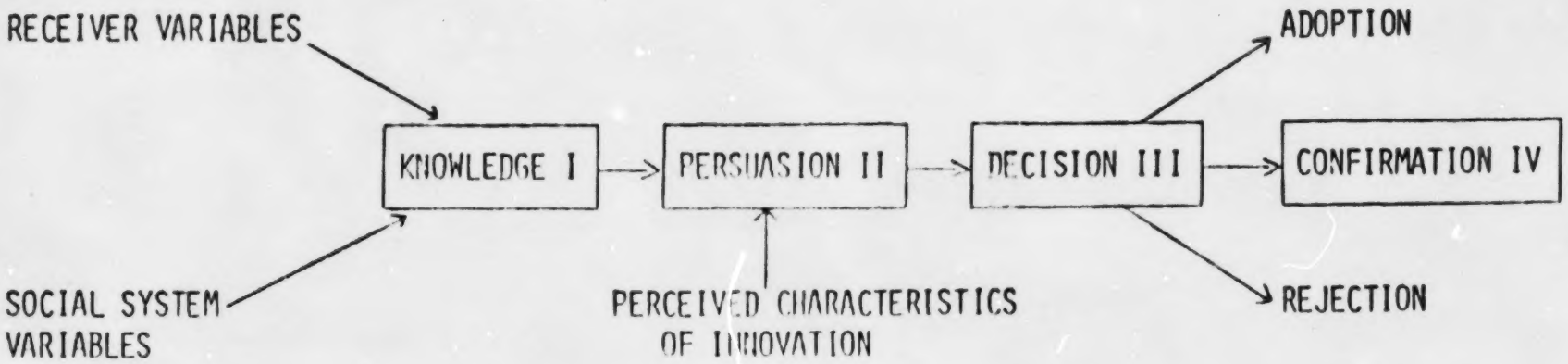


FIGURE II

PARADIGM OF INNOVATION-DECISION PROCESS 2

RECEIVER VARIABLES

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

PERCEIVED NEED FOR INNOVATION

SOCIAL SYSTEM VARIABLES

SOCIAL SYSTEM NORMS

TOLERANCE OF DEVIANCY

COMMUNICATION INTEGRATION

PERCEIVED CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION

RELATIVE ADVANTAGE

COMPATIBILITY

COMPLEXITY

TRIALABILITY

OBSERVABILITY

FIGURE III

STUDENT-SELECTION PROCESS 1

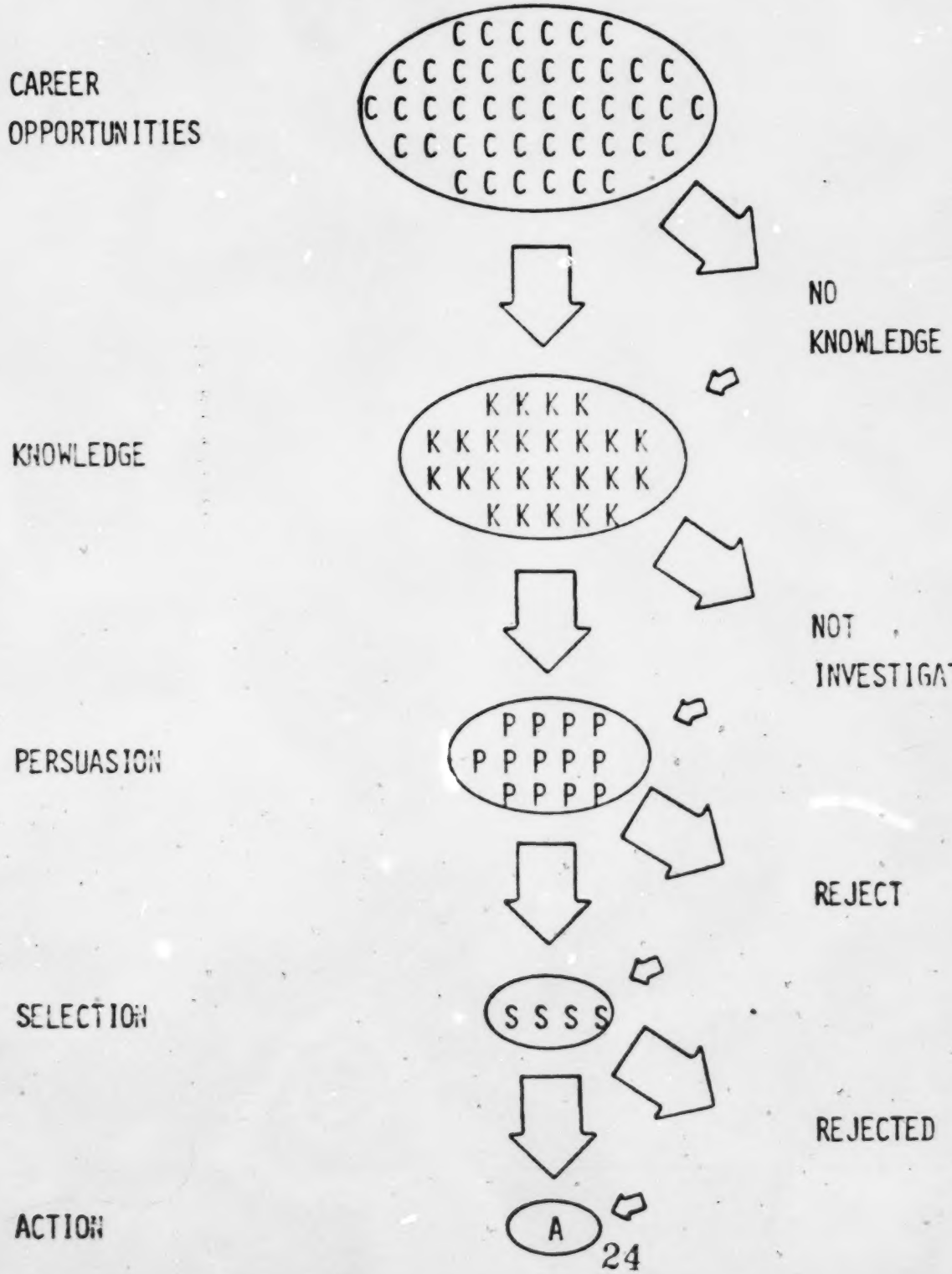

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES
C C C C C C
C C C C C C C C C C
C C C C C C C C C C C C
C C C C C C C C C C
C C C C C C
NO KNOWLEDGE
KNOWLEDGE
K K K K
K K K K K K K K
K K K K K K K K
K K K K K
NOT INVESTIGATED
PERSUASION
P P P P
P P P P P
P P P P
REJECT
SELECTION
S S S S
REJECTED
ACTION
A

FIGURE IV

STUDENT-SELECTION PROCESS 2

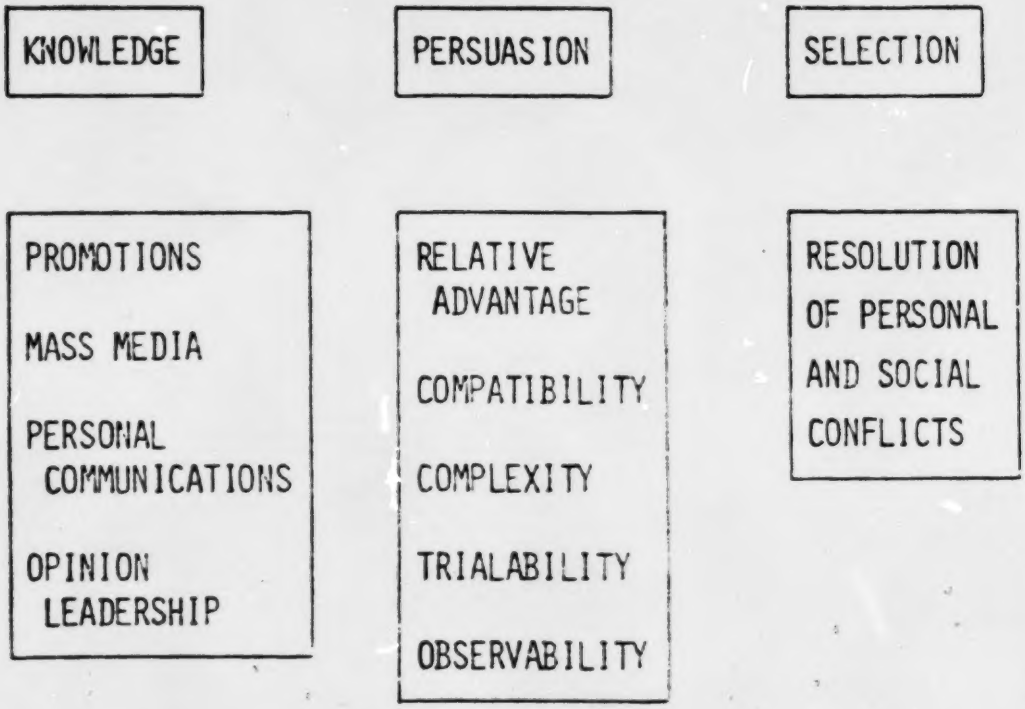
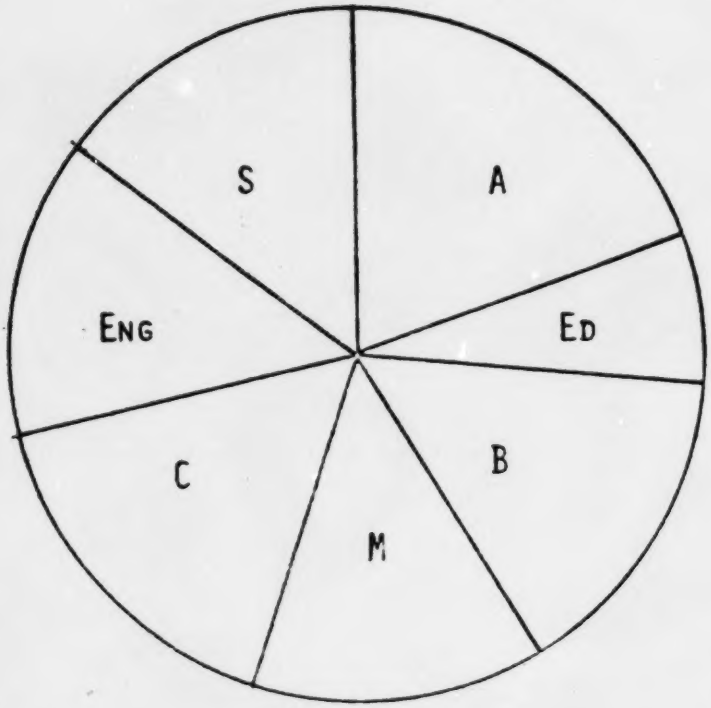


FIGURE V

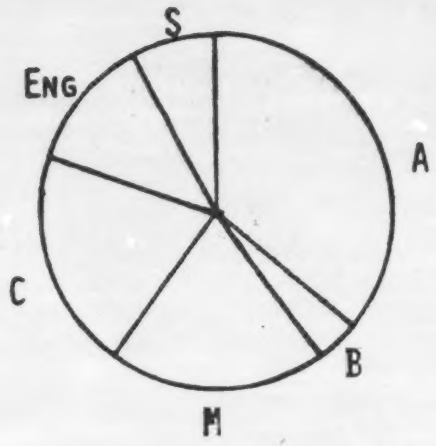
SAMPLE



A	ARTS AND HUMANITIES	17
ED	EDUCATION	6
B	BUSINESS	13
M	MUSIC	12
C	CATERING AND HOTEL MANAGEMENT	14
ENG	ENGINEERING	16
S	SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS	9
	TOTAL	87

FIGURE VI

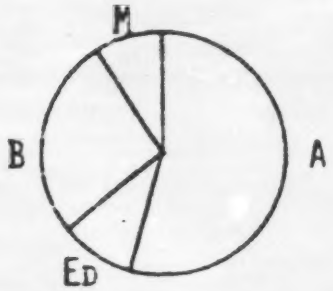
STUDENT CLUSTERS



CLUSTER 1

FAMILIAR INTEREST ORIENTED

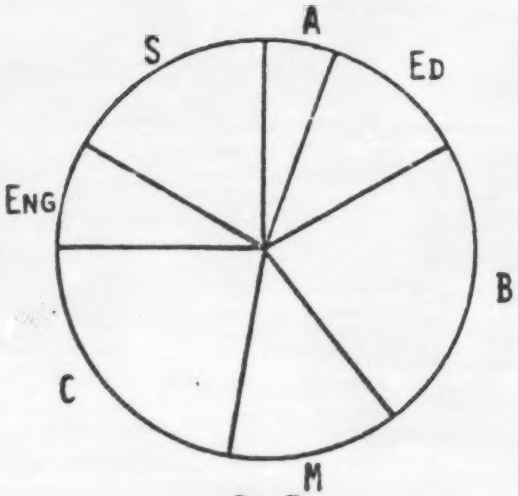
28.7%



CLUSTER 2

ESCAPISTS

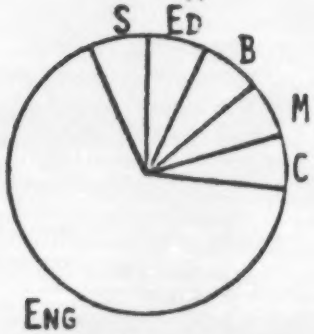
12.6%



CLUSTER 3

CAREER ORIENTED

41.4%



CLUSTER 4

SECURITY ORIENTED

17.3%

FIGURE VII

CLUSTER PROFILES

familiar interest | Escapists | Career oriented | Security

CLUSTER

	1	2	3	4
CHARACTERISTICS				
INTERESTING/STIMULATION	++		++	
CAREER PROSPECTS			++	++
FINANCIAL GAIN			++	++
FAMILIAR SUBJECT	++			++
LEAVING HOME		++	++	
DELAY CAREER CHOICE		++		
PRESTIGE			+	+
EASE OF ENTRY			+	
ADVICE/RECOMMENDATION			+	
INTELLECTUAL LEVEL			+	
LOCATION OF COLLEGE	+			
SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY	+		+	
COURSES				
ARTS AND HUMANITIES	••	••		
EDUCATION		•	••	
BUSINESS		••	••	
MUSIC	•		•	
CATERING & HOTEL MANAGEMENT	•		••	
ENGINEERING				••
SCIENCE AND MATHEMATICS			••	

++ SIGNIFICANTLY HIGH SCORE ON CHARACTERISTIC

+ RELATIVELY HIGH SCORE ON CHARACTERISTIC

•• COURSE REPRESENTING A SIGNIFICANT PROPORTION OF CLUSTER

• COURSE REPRESENTING A RELATIVELY HIGH PROPORTION OF CLUSTER